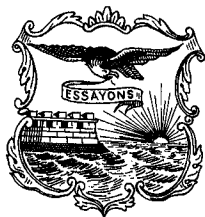


General DuPortail's sketch map was the original plan for the encampment of the Continental Army at Valley Forge in 1777. The Chief Engineer used a French scale of one inch to 130 toises; or, one inch to 780 feet, our measurement. This unusually accurate map places the inner line entrenchments and the two redoubts exactly in locations where they may be identified today by surviving traces. Phonetic bilingual spelling includes "Scoukill Rivier" and "Vallé Crique".

—Historical Society of Pennsylvania



This seal of the U.S. Engineer Department appears on drawings dated as early as 1815.



Chiefs of Engineers' letterheads bore this seal in the 1870's, 1880's.



The current seal, adopted in 1866 and made official by order of General Wilson in 1897

INSIGNIA OF THE CORPS

The configuration of a turreted castle has long been a familiar symbol of the Corps of Engineers, readily recognized and identified in all parts of the globe. Few however, claim certain knowledge of the exact time and circumstances of its adoption. Its earliest documented use seems to have been in 1839 on the uniforms of West Point Cadets. Although most familiar, it is probably not the oldest of the three Corps insignia in use today.

The so-called "Essayons Button" is known to have been worn in the War of 1812. Much later a description of the device on the button appeared in official orders making it part of a new uniform:

---An eagle holding in his beak a scroll with the word "Essayons," a bastion with embrasures in the distance, surrounded by water, and rising sun; the figures to be of dead gold upon a bright field --- General Orders, 7, AGO, 18 Feb 1840

Elements of that design were discovered¹ on the legend of a map drawn by Corps of Engineers Captain Alexander Macomb in 1807. The map represents New York Harbor; the survey was the responsibility of colonel Jonathan Williams, Commandant of the Corps of Engineers. A year earlier, on a map of Charleston Harbor, Captain Macomb had drawn the symbol of an eagle holding in his beak a flying scroll on which is written the motto "Essayons."

No earlier evidence is extant concerning the origin of the heraldic elements which com-

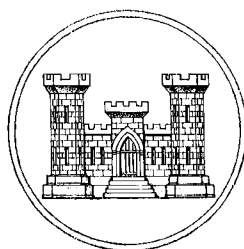


Colonel Jonathan Williams
—National Archives

prise the Essayons Button. What authenticating records there may have been did not survive the West Point fire of 1838. Circumstantially, all known facts point to Colonel Williams and Captain Macomb as designers and adopters of the insignia, not the least significant of which was the button's official adoption in 1840 when Alexander Macomb was General-in-Chief of the United States Army.

The castle insignie was worn on the new uniform approved for West Point cadets in 1839. The uniform was designed by the academy's superintendent, Colonel Richard Delafield; the designer of the turreted castle has not been identified. Use of the castle on the new uniforms of Engineer Officers was recommended to the Secretary of War by Chief Engineer Totten in 1840.

The least familiar Corps of Engineers insignie is the official seal. Adopted after consolidation of the Corps of Engineers and the Corps of Topographical Engineers in 1863, the seal combines symbolic elements of all previous representative devices. Centering the large shield is a horizontal band, the dexter half embodying symbols of the old Essayons Button, the sinister emblazoned with the "TE" of the once separate Corps of Topographical Engineers. The poised eagle and Essayons banner are dominant. General Andrew A. Humphreys, a former member of the Corps of Topographical Engineers, is credited with initiating use of the seal soon after his appointment as Chief of Engineers in 1866. The seal was adopted officially by directive of Chief of Engineers General John Moulder Wilson on 6 April 1897.



The Essayons Button was worn in the War of 1812. The Castle Insignie was first worn by West Point Cadets in 1839.

The heraldic significance of the castle as an armorial symbol may be derived directly and logically from the original function of the Corps: the design and construction of fortifications. The form of castle-fortress adopted was not far-fetched. Many important early works were called castles: Castle Williams and Castle Clinton in New York Harbor; Castle Island in Boston Harbor; Castle Pinckney in South Carolina. Castle Williams was named in honor of its designer, Colonel Jonathan Williams, who appears to have been the co-originator of the insignie.

The Corps motto: Essayons, (We Will Try) was uniquely appropriate for a brigade of technicians faced with the need to accomplish a great many new and difficult tasks quickly. It suggests a certain respect for the magnitude of a mission which at times must have appeared overwhelming. Some have adduced the infusion of foreign sentiment into the Corps' ideals by reason of the French form of the motto. But the sense of the motto could hardly be more American, expressed in any language; the use of French may simply have followed the scholarly tradition of appending an arcane device to an institutional escutcheon, with an implied salute to the Gallic wellspring of 18th century engineering.

The crenelated bastion with turrets is a symbolic reminder of the simultaneous beginnings of Country and Corps. It is also a relic of engineering modes and methods which became obsolete many decades ago. Inversely, the motto remains fresh and current; its statement does not brashly assume an easy resolution of today's problems; in an era of disheartening complexity its simple determination and modest resolve express the fidelity of purpose which has marked the Corps since its inception.